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# AN INVESTIGATION OF FIRST GRADE CHILDREN'S USE OF LANGUAGE STRUCTURE

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One of the more fascinating aspects of pre-school children's verbal language seems to be their uncanny ability to speak in complete sentences. From the time children put two words together meaningfully, they speak in sentences. By the time they arrive in first grade they use simple, compound, and complex sentences. Children can also supply nouns for subjects, verbs for predicates, nouns for objects, and the like.

Labov (1968), for example, reported that "above a certain level of reading skill, the mistakes are meaningful." In other words, when a child substitutes a wrong word in reading, that substitution usually is of the same grammatical structure.

Weber (1966) found that better readers were more grammatical readers. Perhaps the reverse is true as well; that is, children with better grammatical (linguistic) abilities have better reading abilities.

Bever (1968) stated, ". . . we know nothing about a range of facts that are an important part of the child's verbal world."

Out of a discussion of what little is really known of children's verbal worlds came some interesting questions: Is a child's verbal sophistication such that he can utilize even the more ambiguous factors in a sentence structure? It is not necessarily earth-shaking that children will substitute nouns for nouns, verbs for verbs, and so forth, and perhaps even explain their reasons for doing so. But what about something like a preposition? Most adults probably could not define or identify the function of a preposition in a sentence. (From an informal poll of graduate students and secretaries in the University of Oregon College of Education, the most understandable definition was: any relationship between a rabbit and a hill. Most responses were: I don't know.) Would children insert a preposition in a slot

calling for a preposition? If so, how many different prepositions *could* they insert? Would children use multiple prepositions, such as *out of* and *on top of*? Would children with high reading ability insert more prepositions than children with low reading ability?

A small, investigatory classroom study was designed to see if answers could be found to these questions.

The study was done with first grade children in November, 1968. The cooperating school had four first grades that had been grouped according to the Metropolitan Reading Readiness Test and teacher judgment. Only the lowest and the highest classes were tested. The lowest group (group II) consisted of fifteen children. The highest group (group I) consisted of twenty-eight children.

The children were tested individually in the hall away from the class. Group I was tested one day and group II the next. All testing was done between 8:30 and 11:00 a.m.; after that time the noise and confusion in the hall made testing impractical. Care was taken that the test situation, including words used, was the same for each child.

Each child was shown a drawing of a clown over a house. He was shown the sentence, *The clown ..... over the house*, and the sentence was read aloud by the testor. The child was then told, "This is a thinking game. Let's see how many different words you can put in here." and the testor pointed to the blank space.

This portion of the study was used as a practice session prior to the experiment task. It was interesting to note that many children had difficulty putting in a verb. This might have been because of the sentence, rather than difficulty with verbs, but the practice session did indicate to the children what they were to do. If a child appeared uncomfortable, or was unable to supply a verb, the testor said, "The clown *stepped* over the house." If no other words could be supplied, at that point, the testor said, "The clown *jumped* over the house," and then went directly to the test.

Each child was shown a drawing of a tree and several birds. The testor said each time, "Here we have a tree and some birds; and again we want you to fill in a blank space with a word." The child was shown the sentence, *The birds flew ..... the trees*, and the testor read the sentence, pointing to each word as it was spoken.

Without exception, each child responded with a preposition. After the first response the testor said, "Good! Now put another word in here (pointing to the blank). The birds flew ..... . . ." If there was a five second pause the testor would repeat the sentence that the child had successfully done and then repeat the sentence up

to where the preposition would be the next word to be said.

The children were verbally encouraged to continue as long as they could, until they either became visibly nervous or could only repeat the same preposition they had previously used. The repetitions, of course, were not counted.

#### OBSERVATIONS

The study was not intended to be a "classic" one; the method of research and the size of the groups limited the observations, and thus, the conclusions. However, an analysis of the data did show several interesting aspects.

1. The mean number of prepositions for the highest group was 6.03. The range was one to fifteen.

2. The mean number of prepositions for the lowest group was 4.86. The range was two to ten.

3. Every response made was either a single word preposition or a multiple preposition. The six most commonly used prepositions were (in order of frequency): *over, in, on, under, around, on top of*. Other multiple prepositions were: *down under, on the side of, away from, on the trunk of*. The most startling multiple preposition was, *away from the bottom of*.

4. Two children in the highest group made only one response each, the same preposition in both cases—*over*. Both children appeared to be quite nervous and were either afraid of the testing situation or, possibly, unable to function in a choice-making situation. The scores for these two children seriously affected the mean for the highest group.

#### DISCUSSION

What is a preposition? *Webster's New World Dictionary* gives the following definition: ". . . a relation word . . . that connects a noun, pronoun, or noun phrase to another element of a sentence . . ."

Needless to say, children (and even adults) are not aware of the function of the preposition in our language. Seemingly, it is a culturally inherent part of our language (not all languages have prepositions) that is learned right along with doggie, Mommy, Daddy, etc. Although a child learns prepositions along with the rest of his language, he evidently is not conscious of the linguistic structure of his language.

*Went mountain the over the bear* doesn't make sense to the child, because (giggle) "That's silly." Perhaps the word *silly* is as applicable as any other word when describing a statement that is out of linguistic sequence to a child. He doesn't know why it's silly—it's

just silly. In much the same way a child will learn that the outer garment worn in cold weather is a "coat on," because he's heard his parents say, "Come get your coat on."

The interesting thing about the preposition is its ambiguity; that is, few, if any, children are aware of its function, yet it is an integral part of their language. Could the type of test used in this study be a valid and reliable measure of language ability as related to reading? More refinement and more research will be needed before that question is answered. However, it is suggested in this study that there may be a connection between the common elements of reading ability and the ability to provide prepositions in the appropriate place;

Seemingly the test is not directly affected by vocabulary, since the children's responses overlapped a great deal. It appeared that none of the prepositions was unknown to any of the children.

A perplexing factor was the two children who apparently could not function where multiple answers were requested. The source of the inference was, of course, unknown and needs further study.

#### SUMMARY

A test was devised in which first grade children were asked to fill in orally a preposition in the appropriate blank. The high reading group appeared to be able to provide more prepositions than the low reading group, which suggested that there is some relationship between reading ability and language ability as expressed by numbers of prepositions.

More research is needed to determine if the relationship actually exists and of what value it might be.

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